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The community

Notes for
community leaders



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Community projects require good planning

In some towns, a visitor may hear a story about some splendid community facility that once existed—on paper at least.

The story usually begins with an enthusiastic local group hitting on the idea that the town needs some impressive facility to meet recreational needs. Perhaps it is a swimming-pool, or an arena for hockey and curling. With the best will in the world the group launches a noisy campaign to raise the necessary funds. No one questions their civic-mindedness. In fact, their enthusiasm is infectious and a large part of the community falls into step behind them.

But before the bandwagon has gone very far, some people begin to murmur and to wonder whether they can afford an expensive facility that can be used only part of the year or will serve only a small part of the population. Little by little these doubts grow. More and more people begin to have second thoughts. Those actively involved in the canvass are discouraged by the apathy that develops and they begin to lose interest.

Finally, the story goes, it's decided, after some destructive infighting, that the money collected should be put into another project. Some of the canvassers declare they will never again be willing to take on a community job.

If the visitor hears this story from one of the founders of the scheme which began with such high hopes, there may be dark references to a dead town and feelings of ingratitude. But what actually happened was that the group was out of touch with the people of the community. The community as a whole had had no part in the planning, and had never been completely convinced that the project was necessary.

Groups organized for community action cannot afford to guess about "what this town needs". To be successful, their planning must be based on accurate knowledge.

More and more of the people interested in community development are realizing that almost any program of action begins with a study of the community. Plans built on good intentions and high hopes, but without a knowledge of the community—its history, its geography, its economic resources, its population patterns and the typical attitudes of its people—often end in disillusioning failure.

What is a community?

The word “community” has acquired many meanings. Usually its meaning is colored by the background of experience, training and association of the one who uses the word.

The ordinary citizen may think of his or her community as the area of home and work—in terms of the kind of people the neighbors are, the school the children attend, the stores where the family shops, or the park where the family goes for picnics.

A person with a bent for sociology might describe a community as a group of people who feel that they belong to the locality where they live and associate with one another. The individual's sense of belonging to the community rests on the fact that he or she understands and accepts the rules that govern life and work there.

Other sociologists may refer to the community as a geographical and psychological unit. They assure us that the community is vital to human well-being. It is there that people learn to play the roles expected of them. In its complicated network of human relationships, young people receive from older generations the basic cultural inheritance. In this sense, the community helps to create human society, and tends to keep society's institutions to a scale the individual can understand and appreciate.

Philosophers have suggested that a community is like an individual in some ways—that it has personality, form, structure, content, and internal forces and movements. One might also think of the community as a network of persons, physical environment, ways and traditions, influences and compulsions that provide a context for the lives of the people who live in it.

All these views of the community have some points in common. They all make use of these concepts:

- the group
- associations of people
- co-operative satisfaction of needs
- a set of accepted rules and customs
- a limited area, limited numbers of people
- a sense of belonging.

The community as a place

Some things about a community can be changed very little. Every community has its soil and plant life, its lakes and streams. These features of a community change very slowly or not at all, but they have an important effect on the kind of community life that develops in the area.

Fixed features influence the way the community makes its living. This, in turn, will tend to determine the kind of people that are attracted to it and the kind of organized life they will develop.

People soon construct semi-permanent features in the areas where they live. They build highways, schools, churches, civic buildings, factories, parks, playgrounds and commercial centres. These usually cost a great deal of money and take years to come into being, so they cannot be altered or changed easily.

These features also tend to shape the economic and social life of the community. Some of them will have been carefully devised to meet long-term needs. Others may be so poorly devised that they are barriers to progress.

The characteristics of the residential areas of a community are mainly the result of early civic planning (or lack of it), and the kinds of income-groups that live in the community. Their general appearance, and the background of the people who live in them, influence the development that takes place, the kind of neighborhood groups that grow, and the attitudes and behavior patterns that these groups will have.

Transportation facilities within and around the community can have an important bearing on where people work and spend their leisure time. Knowledge of train, airplane, and bus services, street cars and car ownership may be especially important in a suburban area where good transportation may tend to draw residents into the metropolitan centre for some of their activities.

Economy of the community

The way people make their living has a great deal to do with the way they think and behave, the kinds of things they consider important and worthwhile, and the kinds of local groups they take part in.

People in the community who plan for the future, whether they are in business, in education, in local government, or involved in the programs of voluntary groups, should base their plans on knowledge of the economic past and present of the area. Such knowledge will help them to understand the outlook of the citizens, and give them some idea of the kind of changes in population structure, social and economic activity, that may be expected.

In a *rural community*, they might want to know the answers to some of these questions:

- Is this a prosperous farming area now?
- Has it always been prosperous?
- If there has been a change, what was the reason?
- Is it a mixed farming community, or do the farmers specialize in one or two products?
- What is the outlook for future markets, costs and wages?
- Are the young people taking to farming, or moving to the towns and cities?
- Do they see a happy future for themselves in this community?

In an *urban community*, some of the questions might be these:

- Is there only one major employer in the community?
- Does industry and commerce provide steady employment?
- Is there much seasonal unemployment?
- Are new and different industries moving in?
- How is employment divided between commercial and manufacturing enterprises?
- How does pay compare with that in other communities?
- What kind of labor relations exist in the community?

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- Do the young people intend to stay in the community?
 - Do they see a happy future for themselves there?

Economic factors such as levels of wages, steadiness of employment, and types of industry can have an influence on the social life of a community and on its leisure-time activity. Any persons who give some time to the work of local organizations will find that they can do a better job if they are well informed on local economic problems. Much of this information is available from municipal offices, chambers of commerce, boards of trade, bank managers, labor union locals, and, in some communities, from industrial commissioners.

The question of municipal finance is also important to community leaders. More and more services are provided out of taxes. Where tax revenues come from, the amounts available, and what they buy, are part of civic economics. The community leader is better prepared for the job if he or she takes an interest in these matters.

People of the community

The physical characteristics and the economy of the community, along with its civic government, form a framework for the people. In the last analysis, it is the people who live there who determine whether or not a true community exists.

The customs of the people, the way they normally behave, their income level, their education, their ideas of what is worthwhile, their ethnic background, their religion and a multitude of other human values and characteristics will influence the kinds of social groups they will develop.

Family units and close informal neighborhood combinations are the primary groups which will provide the building material for the secondary forms of community organization.

In a country like Canada, where people with different backgrounds are coming together from many different places, it is difficult to foresee the kind of communities that will eventually develop. However, it seems certain that there must be a great deal of inter-group communication, as well as personal meeting between representatives of groups before generally accepted behavior modes and common cultural patterns emerge.

New people arriving in the country tend to begin at the bottom of the economic ladder; this, in turn, tends to create residential areas of newcomers.

The problem of the growth of common behavior and cultural patterns in Canada, therefore, extends out of the community relations. These intercommunity relations are especially important in large cities where there are, in addition to residential communities of newcomers, well-developed ethnic associations based on the languages of old countries, and ethnic clubs fostering the cultures of the old countries. This applies to a large number of towns and cities in Ontario.

Organizations and institutions in the community

Many activities and many social contacts are associated with more formal organizations than the ones already suggested. These formal organizations are both civic and voluntary.

Most civic organizations and institutions are provided out of taxes for the benefit of all the residents of a municipality. The most important are concerned with the way a community governs itself, preserves order, promotes health and meets modern educational needs. Generally, these organizations are set up to provide the kind of service that each person cannot provide better as an individual. In a democracy, most are subject to the control of the majority of the people and must serve their expressed wishes.

Among the voluntary organizations we have churches, service clubs, patriotic organizations, home and school associations, youth clubs, and various special-interest groups. Voluntary organizations may be selective in character and designed to serve particular groups based on religious or ethnic affiliations, occupational, educational, or other interest. At times some voluntary organizations in a community may become self-centred, compete for the support of the community and try to preserve or attain for their own members a favored way of life or special privileges.

Sometimes membership in these organizations is not entirely "voluntary". Children for example, often participate in groups at the request of their parents. Provided they get social satisfaction from the participation, it will eventually become truly voluntary. Adult participation may often be completely voluntary, but at times it is also tinged with social pressure—it is "expected", it is the "right thing to do", or "the best people go there".

The leaders of community action programs should make a point of knowing the organizations in their communities. One of their tasks may be the promotion of working arrangements and agreements between voluntary organizations. The success of a program may depend on how well community leaders are informed about various local organizations, and on how well they appreciate each other's problems.

The primary groups, such as the family and neighborhood units, and the formally organized secondary groups in the community, continually interact upon each other. Together with other factors—physical, economic and social—they set the stage on which every resident functions as a member of the community.

Leadership in the community

Whenever groups of people undertake co-operative action, there is always the need for leadership. Decisions have to be made about the divisions of labor, planning and co-ordination of effort. Continuous administration must be provided to ensure that decisions are carried out promptly and efficiently.

The decision-making and the administration may be thoroughly democratic, or almost dictatorial, but in any case there must be some form of leadership.

In the family group the role of leadership is usually filled by one of the parents. In most community organizations, leadership is provided either by people who assume the roles when they sense the need, or by those who are especially appointed or elected.

Leadership capacities are often cumulative. It has been said that once a person gets a job, the chances of getting another are about 70% greater. We often hear the saying "to get a job well done, give it to a busy person". We see in practice that leadership tends to gravitate into a few hands.

Community leaders emerge from many sources. Some play the part of leaders because they hold office in voluntary organizations or in civic government. Others exercise leadership because of family connection or wealth, while still others become leaders because of special knowledge or skill, or because of ability to foresee the need and to inspire others to follow their lead. Often this last reason is basic to the others.

Leadership may be exercised through primary or secondary groups, through civic, social or economic channels. In some cases the real basis and source of leadership may not be obvious. It is important to be able to identify the nature and origin of power and leadership in a community.

The community and democracy

Action-minded community groups should not be content to look only at a cross-section of the community. A community is dynamic, so it is important to be able to see the direction in which it is moving and how the various forces acting upon it and within it are resolving themselves.

The strongest cement between people in groups is the feeling of having common values, hopes and customs. Even geographic proximity may be a relatively weak factor in the sense of belonging when compared with the sharing of common hopes and fears.

Whenever the security of such a group is threatened, the feeling of belonging is strengthened and increases the group's cohesiveness. Some of these threats may be obvious. In modern society some threats to the security of the group, both from within and from outside, may be so elusive that they can only be generally understood with the help of wise and imaginative leadership.

The lack of a sense of belonging, of local pride and leadership, the presence of cliques, apathy or selfishness, the fact that a community is still new—these and many other factors may retard the growth of a community. The feeling of having common interest and values develops readily in geographic residential groups if there is easy means of contact between individuals and groups. In some communities a great deal still remains to be done to provide opportunities for these contacts.

In a democratic society, a community is valuable where:

- the people are prepared to work co-operatively toward solving their common problems;
- the potential resources needed for the solution of their problems exist in the community;
- the people know how to use these resources.

The harnessing of these resources, human and material, by the people of the community, on their own behalf, is a task in real citizenship. The most important problems of citizenship for most men and women are nearer to their own doorsteps than to the provincial or national capital. Unless we develop the drive and know-how to take appropriate action about our local affairs, we will have missed the opportunity to equip ourselves for effective participation at higher, more remote, and less easily-influenced levels of social structure.

How well do you know your community?

Here is a list of questions that might be of interest to a community leader examining the community from several points of view.

History

How did this community come into being?

Who were the first settlers?

What have been the broad economic and population changes over the years?

Geography

What are the geographic limits?

If near a larger centre, how does that centre affect:

— employment?

— spare-time activities?

What are the transportation facilities?

If a rural community, what sort of towns are nearby?

If an urban community, what is the nature of surrounding country from the point of view of:

— scenery?

— winter sports?

— summer playgrounds?

— occupation of rural people?

Economics

What kind of industries are there?

How many do they employ?

Are they seasonal?

What is the average income of workers?

What kind of farming is done?

Are the farmers traditional or progressive?

What is their income level?

What proportion of average income goes into local taxes?

What sorts of commercial establishments are there?

People

What is the population pattern of:

- ethnic origins?
- religions?
- age groups?
- sexes?
- education?

Do ethnic and religious groups tend to live together, separated from other groups?

Is there friction among residents because of origin, religion or economic class?

Are there many neighborhood groups in the community?

Are there many special-interest groups in the community?

What kind?

What proportion of the people belong to some organization?

Is there much inter-marriage between different ethnic and religious groups?

Institutions

How many churches are there?

What denominations are they?

What is their total membership?

Do ministers, priests and rabbis have a church council?

What educational and recreation programs do churches provide?

How many schools are there? (a) elementary? (b) secondary?

What proportion of children who finish grade 8 go on to secondary schools?

What proportion of those who go to secondary school finish the course?

What opportunities do the schools offer for further training for those who are employed?

What kind of adult programs are offered in the schools?

What service clubs are there in the community?

What other voluntary groups are there?

What community work do they do?

Is there a community council where voluntary organizations meet and plan their activities?

Are community organizations representative of the total population?

Civic Institutions

What services are provided out of taxes:

- water?
- sewage?
- parks?
- recreation programs?
- police?
- fire protection?
- health services?

What proportion of those eligible to vote, voted in the last three or four:

- civic elections?
- provincial elections?
- national elections?

As an educated guess, what proportion of the voters know or have met the local representative in:

- local government?
- provincial government?
- national government?

Leadership

Do the same people get elected year after year:

- to the local government?
- to the school board?

Do voluntary groups elect the same people year to year?

What opportunities do they provide for young members to practise the job of leadership?

How does your group decide who has leadership qualities?

Are your civic representatives drawn from people who have worked in voluntary organizations?

Who would you say are:

— the ten best known

— the ten best-liked

— the ten most-respected citizens in your community?

Would you say that voluntary groups in your community are interested mainly in what the community can do for their own growth and development?

Do you find it difficult to get people to take on jobs in organizations? Why?

How do you deal with personal frictions in your organization?

Are they brought into the open?

Is democratic leadership different from other kinds of leadership? How?

Community

What attitudes among the residents tend to make a better community?

What do the words “better community” mean to you? Is that meaning widely accepted in your community?

What attitudes hinder growth of a good community?

What are the desirable characteristics of a community in a democratic society?

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